

5,000 YEARS OF HISTORY

Archaeology, Nationalism, and Politics in Korea

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ABSTRACT

Nowhere in the world does the past bear as much relevance to the present as in Northeast Asia, where archaeology is employed for nationalistic and political purposes, to construct national identities, build state legitimacy, and even press territorial claims. Korea presents a unique case study in understanding the intersection of nationalism, politics, and archaeology in a world of nation-states, not only for the high level of historical consciousness that permeates Korean society, but also the division of the nation into two states. Each state, North and South, has used the past to serve the present in different ways, despite having fundamentally similar aims: to assert the cultural individuality and historical independence of Korea from ideological and often military aggression from its larger neighbors, China and Japan. This paper aims to explore the motivations and consequences of nationalistic archaeology in Korea by examining its colonial Japanese roots the heavy influence this has had on the development of postcolonial Korean archaeology. Further, the case study of the Dangun myth—the origin myth of the Korean people—and its modern co-option is analyzed to explore the reasons why memories of the distant past are so integral to modern Korean identity. In closing, the paper considers how nationalistic archaeology and politics in Northeast Asia are colliding and will continue to collide in the twenty-first century present, through a brief discussion of the recent example of China’s highly controversial Northeast Project.

INTRODUCTION¹

Korea is a nation with a resplendent history and time immemorial traditions; those familiar will immediately recognize the language of the preceding statement as borrowed from the opening line of the constitution of the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea). Indeed, Korea is perceived, together with Japan, to be one of the most historically homogeneous countries in the world. In the past, however, Northeast Asia was a place of regular migrations and constantly shifting political boundaries. The fact is that several historical states in the region straddled the present-day border between China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea), such that it becomes difficult to ascertain, at least on territorial terms, whether these kingdoms were Korean or Chinese.² Moreover, it is becoming increasingly possible to link Korea and Japan in similar fashion, although, for reasons that will be made abundantly clear, suggestions of this variety are generally unpopular in both nations.

Given the interconnectedness of Northeast Asia in the past, it is not surprising that the archaeology of any one modern nation in the region informs not only its own history but that of the entire region. As such, Korean history and archaeology is inseparable from that of China and Japan (Portal 2000: 23); this is a critical point to bear in mind. However, the political climate in the past century has been nationalistically charged to such an extent that conflicts inevitably arise when nation-states attempt to appropriate the past to each assert its own national identity (Nelson 2006: 37–38). One of the aims of this paper is to consider the broader topic of the relationship between archaeology, nationalism, and politics through the example of nationalistic archaeology in Korea.³

¹ A note on Romanization: Revised Romanization is used for Korean, excepting commonly used spellings (e.g. Pyongyang not Pyeongyang) and authors who have Romanized their names alternately. *Pīnyīn* is used for Chinese (diacritic marks are generally omitted for proper nouns, e.g. Lelang not Lèlàng). For the most part, traditional Chinese characters are used throughout except in the concluding section of the paper and, where appropriate, in citation.

² The traditional view has been that these were Korean kingdoms, but it is one that is increasingly challenged, by China. In order to promote political unity among its ethnic minorities, China is attempting to integrate into mainstream Chinese history the history of any region that falls within its modern territorial limits. I will discuss this issue at length further into the paper.

³ Wailes and Zoll rightly point out that the term nationalistic archaeology is “not necessarily connected ideologically with either an existing or proposed nation-state” and prefer to use the term ethnic archaeology

Thus it is first necessary to establish a suitable framework for understanding archaeology under the influence of nationalism and politics.

Before I do so, I should like to highlight certain aspects of Korean archaeology which differ from Western archaeology and thus may require some elaboration. First, archaeology in East Asia, especially in China, has traditionally been considered a sub-discipline or “handmaid” of history, tasked only with augmenting historical documents (Glover 2006; Nelson 1995: 218, 2006: 37–38). Increasingly, however, archaeology is recognized as a field capable of illuminating the past in its own right,⁴ particularly that distant past on which textual records are silent, which in the case of Korea includes and precedes the protohistoric first millennium BCE.⁵ Second, in his assessment of the state of the field in South Korea, Choi Seong-rak identified three foci of archaeological research: (1) to uncover buried material culture, (2) to identify the origins of Korean culture, and (3) to define the past territorial limits of the Korean cultural sphere. Thus the ultimate motive of archaeological research in Korea is—*explicitly*—to assert the individuality of Korean culture and to ascertain the independent origins of Korean ethnic identity (Choi, S. 2008: 168–69).

Why is the topic of ethnogenesis so central to Korean archaeology?⁶ I will address this question in detail below, but for the moment a cursory answer will have to suffice. In part, the obsession with identifying Korean ethnic roots can be explained as a reaction against Japanese colonial scholarship, which sought to link the Korean and Japanese races together as justification for Japan’s annexation of Korea in 1910. But there are deeper factors at play. The position of Korea in history as a country assailed from all sides by foreign aggression was an important contributive

to describe the “archaeology of cultural, or historical, identity” (Wailles and Zoll 1995: 22). In the case of Korea, however, ethnicity and nationality coincide to such an extent (Cummings 2005: 25) that no such distinction can be made. Therefore, I have opted to use the term nationalistic archaeology, which in any case more clearly reflects the political orientations of Korean archaeology. The term ethnonationalistic archaeology is also appropriate.

⁴ For details on this shift, see Pai 2000: 14–16.

⁵ The earliest historical documents which make reference to Korea are of Chinese authorship. The oldest of these is the *Historical Records* [*Shǐjì* 史記], written 109–91 BCE by Sima Qian 司馬遷. However, the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* [*Sānguózhì* 三國志], a third century CE text written by Chen Shou 陳壽, contains the most detailed account of ancient Korea (Lee, P., ed. 1993).

⁶ Nelson posits that ethnogenesis may not be the most appropriate term for Korea, since some Koreans consider their ethnicity to be timeless; that is, it was never formed but always present (Nelson 1995: 223). The distinction is noteworthy but not immediately crucial for the purpose of this paper.

factor in shaping Korean identity (Nelson 1993: 3).⁷ In 1963, a time not far removed from the Japanese occupation which ended in 1945, scholar Lee Hi-Seung wrote, “No matter how much [a nation] assimilates and enjoys its imported culture, its subjectivity, or its mental sovereignty, should not be lessened or even lost by foreign influence... The subjectivity of a nation is built up in the process of creating its own culture and enjoying it”—thereby advising nascent modern Korea to cultivate and promote its own cultural identity (1963: 14–5).

The intersection of ethnicity, archaeology, and nationalistic politics is a topic which, although readily apparent, has only been examined critically in the past several decades (Kohl and Fawcett 1995: 4). Study of the archaeology of Korea is therefore an important addition especially considering Korea’s unique position in developing apart from Japan and China while still being fundamentally tied to the greater Northeast Asian region. Below, I will present the theoretical framework for exploring nationalistic archaeology, after which I will describe the colonial beginnings of archaeology in Korea and the development of the field following independence. The case study of the Dangun origin myth of Korea will be highlighted to examine the effects of colonial history, nationalistic politics, and ethnocentrism on archaeological practice. Lastly, I will discuss how these issues are active in present-day Northeast Asia, as China and Korea in particular struggle to claim ownership of the region’s past.

NATIONALISTIC ARCHAEOLOGY IN CONTEXT

It has been previously argued that the nationalistic orientation of most archaeological traditions is not an exclusively postcolonial development but an inherent characteristic of the field (Kohl and Fawcett 1995; Trigger 1984, 1995). Here I am not concerned with why this is the case but rather with how the relationship between nationalism and archaeology is defined, principally in

⁷ In the ROK, and likely the DPRK as well, the school of nationalistic historiography [*minjok sahak* 민족사학] is dominant and according to it, the history of Korea is one of “continuous national struggle” [*tujaengsa* 투쟁사] (Pai 1994: 25–26).

the context of postcolonial East and Southeast Asia, although relevant examples from Europe are also given. In brief, archaeology in East and Southeast Asia can be said to have colonial roots. The earliest archaeological research conducted in the region was directed by Western scholars, whose colonialist stance maintained that native societies were culturally stagnant and unable to develop, in contrast to the vibrant imperial powers of the West (González-Ruibal 2010; Trigger 1984: 363). In direct response, to disprove and reverse colonialist readings of their histories, postcolonial East and Southeast Asian nations utilized archaeology “to labor in the service of emergent identities in the present” (Meskell 2007: 216). Only Thailand, alone in the region (excepting Japan) to have avoided colonization, was comparatively late to use archaeology as a tool for nation-building. Elsewhere, nationalistic archaeology materialized immediately and in full force to seek in a glorious past, real or imagined, suitable ideological backing for newly formed national identities (Glover 2006). In this process, emphasis was often placed on the more recent past, as its surviving monuments and relics were especially potent in physically and visually linking modern nation-states to their geographic and cultural predecessors (Trigger 1984: 360).

The case of Korea exhibits a number of differences to the processes outlined above. For one, Korean scholars, concerned with identifying Korean ethnic origins, looked primarily to its distant past rather than more recent history (Shim 2002: 272). An additional factor for this interest in prehistory was that Japanese colonial archaeology had similarly studied prehistory in order to validate *nissen dōsoron* 日鮮同祖論, the theory of shared ancestral origins of the Japanese and Korean races. The theory also posited that Korea was culturally backward;⁸ therefore, Japan was duty-bound to “repair” the cultural lapse of its brother country by integrating Korea into the superior cultural sphere of the Japanese empire (Robinson 2007: 36, 44). Understandably, Korean scholars after Korean independence viewed the scholarship produced during the colonial period as “tainted” by colonialist interpretations, and in need of correction. Even in the present-day, “historians and archaeologists in Korea and Japan still fight over the interpretation of the colonial materials as they try to unscramble this narrative in an academic climate still dominated by nationalistic passions” (Robinson 2007: 44–45). It is important to consider also Korea’s continuous

⁸ The so-called stagnation theory was called *teitaron* 停滯論 (Pai 2000: 55; Shim 2002: 271).

need throughout its long history to assert cultural individuality from foreign cultural influence, particularly that of China. Japan's twentieth century incursions therefore represented only the latest event in a longstanding tradition of such foreign aggression.

Finally, the most salient different between Korea and most other postcolonial nations is that Korea was partitioned in two, North and South, after independence and remains divided to this day. The division resulted in the establishment of two states with quite different political systems, each with its own historical needs. Thus, two narratives of Korean history developed, each as legitimate as the other.⁹ By comparing the two narratives, it is possible to trace the influence of nationalism and politics on the reconstruction of history in Korea in the past sixty years. Several rough parallels to the unique political situation of Korea exist elsewhere, for instance in Taiwan and Ireland. The case of Taiwan, historically a part of China but now partitioned, centers on the various interpretations of the island's prehistory. Traditionally, the generally accepted view has been that the prehistoric inhabitants of Taiwan had originally migrated from northern China. Taiwanese political interests have since impacted scholarship such that at present, Taiwan's prehistoric peoples are more closely linked to Austronesian cultures than to the Chinese mainland (Glover 2006: 20).

The case of Ireland bears uncanny similarities to that of Korea. Irish archaeology has been strongly influenced by the island's historical relationship with England (Cooney 1995: 272), just as Korean archaeology has been shaped by the Korean Peninsula's historical relationship with Japan. In other words, both Ireland and Korea once came under the domination not of geographically distant and historically removed imperial powers, but of neighbors with whom they share intimately linked pasts. As in Korea, questions of ethnicity entered the picture in Ireland: The Home Rule movement and the rise of nationalist sentiment in the nineteenth century were marked in part by the imagining of a glorious Irish past with "an ethnically pure culture of Celtic origins." These desires came to the forefront in the aftermath of the Irish revolutionary period in the 1910s–1920s,

⁹ I am referring here to legitimacy, not accuracy. The DPRK's account of Korean history is normally disregarded by the West on grounds of the lack of scientific basis in North Korean archaeological research and its largely subjective interpretations. It is nonetheless legitimate to the DPRK government and, one must assume, the North Korean people as well.

when social memory was shaped through the removal of British imperial symbols from Ireland—statuary of British monarchs, for example (Woodman 1995: 280–82). At present, the political division of Ireland has fostered a climate in which scholars of both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have been hesitant to engage in discussions on the topic of the relationship between archaeology and politics on that island (Cooney 1995: 272).

The past is indeed a potent tool for the present. Meskell notes that the past can be “reworked and reinterpreted, multiply claimed, appropriated, erased, or capitalized upon” (2012: 233), which certainly has been the case in Korea, where the past has been heavily manipulated in the process of postcolonial nation-building and identity-construction. But as detailed above, Korean archaeology exhibits a number of interesting differences in relation to postcolonial archaeology in other East and Southeast Asian nations, which may be summarized as such: (1) the origins of Korean archaeology in Japanese colonial scholarship, and (2) the division of Korea into two states following independence operating under radically different political systems. I will now discuss these points in sequence.

COLONIAL ORIGINS OF KOREAN ARCHAEOLOGY

Archaeology in Korea began with imperial Japan’s interest in the Korean past, an interest that was in numerous ways politically motivated. In this brief outline of Japanese archaeological research in Korea during the colonial period, I will present evidence for the argument that Japanese colonial archaeology had a lasting influence on the development of postcolonial Korean archaeology (made subsequently). Korean media and academia are, on the whole, extremely critical of Japanese colonial scholarship. According to the prevailing disposition, Japanese colonial scholarship was merely a façade behind which Korean antiques were plundered by the Japanese. Moreover, the purpose of Japanese colonial research was to justify Japan’s interventions in Korean affairs in the early twentieth century. While these are warranted views, the reality is that there were aspects of Japanese colonial scholarship that were beneficial to Korea in the long-term, a fact that is,

understandably, infrequently discussed. It is to these often neglected aspects of Japanese colonial scholarship I first turn my attention.

Prior to Japanese colonial rule, Joseon Korea under the Yi Dynasty (1392–1897 CE) did not focus on protecting cultural relics and monuments. Early on, Japanese archaeologists “noted this neglect... and constantly deplored the fact that with each passing day, precious monuments were being lost” (Pai 1994: 29). In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that in 1916, Japan enacted the first cultural property protection laws in Korea,¹⁰ a full three years before similar legislation was introduced in Japan itself. As a result, the Colonial Governor-General Committee for the Investigation of Ancient Remains and Relics was established and, in short, enforced the registration, protection, and maintenance of hundreds of historical sites in Korea (Pai 1994: 32–33, 2010: 95, 97–99). Furthermore, the Japanese Governor-General of Korea (GGK) was the first to designate select Korean artifacts and sites as National Treasures. At the time this was a political move by which Japan demonstrated its authority and self-professed superiority over Korea, because only *Japanese* scholars and bureaucrats could decide what qualified as National Treasures, and thus what was representative of *Korean* culture and history (Pai 1994: 37–38). Ironically, the notion of National Treasures persisted after the colonial period; at present in the ROK, they are designated by the Office of Cultural Properties (Nelson 2006: 42), and a consistently controversial topic in the South Korea has been that of cultural heritage repatriation.¹¹

The benefits that accompanied Japanese colonial scholarship were clearly significant in the long-term. It is worth noting that Japanese colonial scholarship itself was meticulous and detailed. Few criticize its quality, and it was regarded as one of the best examples of accurate, organized, and well-published research in its time (Arimitsu 1966; Nelson 2006: 46; Pai 1994, 2010: 99; contra Kim, C. 2000). For instance, the groundbreaking works of Torri Ryuzo on identifying the Neolithic cultures of the Korean Peninsula was highly influential in subsequent Japanese and South Korean

¹⁰ This law was called the Regulations on the Preservation of Ancient Sites and Relics of Chōsen [*Koseki oyobi ibutsu bozon kitei*]. It was followed, after independence, by the Cultural Properties Preservation Act (1962) in South Korea (Pai 2000: 4–5).

¹¹ The topic of cultural heritage repatriation has clear political ramifications and is very relevant to this paper, but unfortunately beyond its scope. For further reading, see Chōng 2005; Thompson 2013.

scholarship. Pioneering Japanese research on Lelang Commandery¹² was similarly seminal for future studies (Arimitsu 1966: 76–77).¹³ The problem, as ever, was in the colonialist bias of interpretation and publication. Not only did Japan exclude local scholars from participating in research projects and provide little in the ways of training, Japanese research was not published in Korean (Nelson 2006: 41–42).

The colonialist interpretations of Japanese colonial scholarship are readily apparent. The principle theory that guided Japanese colonial scholarship, particularly archaeological research, was *nissen dōsorōn* (see above), to which there were four components: (1) the Japanese and Koreans share common racial ancestry;¹⁴ (2) Japanese people once ruled part of the Korean Peninsula, ca. 300–600 CE; (3) Korean civilization developed by feeding on China’s more advanced culture; (4) Korean culture and civilization is less advanced than that of China and Japan (Pai 1994: 39). Under this theory, Japan saw it as its duty to bring Korea under the imperial umbrella of Japan, thereby helping Korea out of its cultural backwardness—the justification for the colonization of Korea (Pai 1994: 40; Nelson 2006: 38–41). It must have been galling for Koreans to swallow this idea. In the present-day, strong anti-Japanese rhetoric is still prevalent in South Korea. Japan’s colonial policies are often described as the “politics of annihilation/massacre of Korean culture identity” [*minjok malsal jeongchaek* 민족말살정책], and Japanese colonial scholarship is described as the “misuse/conspiracy of imperial Japanese scholarship” [*ilje oyong hakja* 일제오용학자] (Pai 1994: 28, 41, 2010: 1).

An example that illustrates the use of *nissen dōsorōn* for political aims is the controversy surrounding the Stele of King Gwanggaeto [*gwanggaetowangbi* 광개토왕비], found in 1882 at Ji’an, Jilin Province, an early capital of the Goguryeo kingdom (37 BCE–668 CE). The stele, which bears an inscription composed of 1,775 Chinese characters, is over six meters in height and dates to 414 CE.

¹² Lelang Commandery (108 BCE–313 CE), established in the vicinity of modern Pyongyang, was one of four commanderies to be established in or near the Korean Peninsula by the Han Dynasty of China.

¹³ See Arimitsu 1966 for details on other notable Japanese colonial scholars and their works (cf. Pai 2000, chapter two).

¹⁴ This idea, *Man-Sen shi* 滿鮮史, extended to Manchuria, another target of Japanese imperialism; Japanese scholars attempted to ethnically link both Manchus and Koreans to the Japanese (Nelson 2006: 38–41; Shim 2002: 271).

Weighing almost forty tons, it is an imposing monument, at present displayed in Ji'an (Kang, H. 2001: 28). Studies by Japanese scholars quickly concluded that the inscription confirmed accounts in the eighth century CE text *Chronicles of Japan* [*Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀], according to which a Japanese state ruled part of southern Korea ca. 300–600 CE (Nelson 2006: 47).¹⁵ The find was rather convenient for the Japanese, who in the late nineteenth century were beginning to push into Asia with Korea as their foothold on the continent; here was a text bearing a “historical” precedent! (Yŏn 2006: 154).

The Korean response to the Japanese reading of the stele was highly critical. Both North and South Korean scholars have since argued that the partially defaced inscriptions make multiple interpretations possible. Some scholars even claimed that the Japanese had deliberately damaged the stele upon discovering it in order to make possible a reading that aligned with imperial Japan’s political agendas (Portal 2005: 119). The first of such claims were made in 1972 but research since has established that the stele was probably not deliberately damaged, though it was possibly harmed during conservation work after rubbings of the initial inscription had been made (Yŏn 2006: 155). Meanwhile, in July 2012, what is thought to be another Goguryeo stele was found near Ji’an in China. Preliminary reports were only released on January 4, 2013, and the delay has prompted skeptical reception to the discovery in South Korea.¹⁶ Suggestions have been made on the Korean side of the debate that the stele represents China’s latest attempt to incorporate Goguryeo history into mainstream Chinese history (see below). Some South Korean media outlets have since dubbed the stele “the second Gwanggaeto stele.”¹⁷

¹⁵ The stele itself identifies a group called the Wa 倭, an old Chinese name for the people that once occupied the western/southern part of the Japanese archipelago. Colonial Japanese scholars attributed to this group the state of Mimana, which they equated with the Gaya confederation (42–562 CE), considered one of Korea’s earliest states (Nelson 1995: 222). For a philological study of the stele inscription, see Beack 2005.

¹⁶ For this report, see, “Jílín Jí’ān xīn jiàn Gāogōuli shíbēi: cūnmín fāxiàn bìng bàogào wénwù bùmén 吉林集安新见高句丽石碑:村民发现并报告文物部门 [Goguryeo Stele Newly Discovered in Jilin, Ji’an: Villagers Report Discovery to the Cultural Relics Department],” Zhōngguó wénwù xìnxī wǎng 中国文物信息网 [Chinese Cultural Relics News Network], January 4, 2013, [URL].

¹⁷ Ban, Seon-hye, “Sinbalgyeon ‘Ji’an Goguryeobi’, Gwanggaetowang-i saegin choegobi 新발견 ‘지안 고구려비’, 광개토왕이 새긴 최고비 [Newly Discovered Ji’an Goguryeo Stele, Greatest Stele Inscribed by King Gwanggaeto],” 뉴스천지, February 1, 2013, [URL]; Kim, Tong-hyung. “Stone to stoke old Goguryeo rivalry,”

All four components of *nissen dōsoron* laid out by Pai are illustrated by the controversy of the Gwangaeto stele. Connecting this case to broader patterns of Japanese archaeological research in Korea is the fact that Japan's most prominent excavations were Silla tombs (57 BCE–935 CE), Lelang tombs, and Goguryeo tombs—all early states. Data from these excavations were interpreted accordingly in order to substantiate the idea that Korean and Japanese ethnic roots were linked. Altogether, Japan conducted four decades of archaeological research in Korea (see Pai 2010: 94–96 for a table listing key events for this period), starting with the first archaeological survey of the Korean Peninsula in 1901. By 1937, the GGK completed the publication of the *History of Korea* [*Chōsenshi* 朝鮮史] in 37 volumes, which was “an elaborate justification of colonial rule” (Robinson 2007: 44–45). Despite such obviously political uses of scholarship and the lack of conscious effort on Japan's part to create a legacy of archaeological research in Korea, the Japanese did conduct well-received research (at the time, at any rate) which continues, albeit necessarily, to be the basis of much Korean scholarship on the topic of Korea's earliest states. Japan also introduced laws to protect cultural heritage sites and artifacts in Korea before the same was done in Japan itself. It is therefore entirely possible, if not particularly popular, to attribute to Japanese colonial scholarship the high priority placed on the study and protection of cultural heritage in Korea today.

KOREAN ARCHAEOLOGY SINCE 1945

Korea's independence from Japan in 1945 enabled Korean archaeologists to take charge in leading the development of postcolonial Korean archaeology, which can be characterized in two ways. The first is the lasting influence of Japanese colonial archaeology on Korean archaeology, which is a two-sided issue: Although Korean scholarship was markedly anti-Japanese and greatly inspired by the desire and need to refute the interpretations of Japanese scholarship, it nonetheless relied on the precedent of Japanese research, which was the only framework available and

Korea Times, April 16, 2013, [\[URL\]](#); Shim, S., “Koguryo stele discovered in China,” *Yonhap News Agency*, January 16, 2013, [\[URL\]](#).

accessible. The second characterization concerns the division of Korea. The DPRK and the ROK operated under different ideologies and as such it was necessary to utilize the past in different ways to legitimate the state. It is argued here, however, that despite the divergences, the archaeology of North Korea and that of South Korea are fundamentally alike in their aims to assert a longstanding tradition of Korean individuality and a glorious, timeless Korean past.¹⁸

To begin with the effects of Japanese colonial research in postcolonial Korea, I highlight Pai's argument that "the contemporary Korean national historical framework advocating racial purity, the permanent nature of racial characteristic, and the historical destiny of the nation is firmly entrenched in early twentieth-century Japanese colonial ideologies" (1994: 28). I have shown above through such examples as the *nissen dōsoron* theory and the Gwanggaeto stele controversy that Japan justified the colonization of Korea by claiming an alleged precedent for Japanese presence in the Korean Peninsula and by linking together the origins of the Japanese and Korean peoples. In order for Korean scholars to legitimate Korea's newly gained political independence, they needed to assert Korea's cultural individuality, which was accomplished by presenting an account of Korean prehistory and ethnic origins that invalidated the one offered by Japanese colonial scholarship. Questions not simply of the content of postcolonial research but also of methodology arose. It was only natural that Korean scholars should co-opt the framework of Japanese research to use it as a tool against Japanese colonial interpretations of the Korean past—it was necessary for Korean scholars to examine the same body of evidence. The first archaeological excavation after independence was the 1946 excavation of Silla sites in Gyeongju, where Japanese archaeologists had previously worked.

The largely indigenous development of Korean archaeology, keeping with the theme of independence and individuality, was itself a source of pride to Korean archaeologists (Nelson 1993: 3). However, despite South Korean archaeologists' "fierce determination to do archaeology without foreign influence," Western scholars were not actively discouraged from engaging with South

¹⁸ In this section, greater focus is placed on analyzing the DPRK's use of the past for national identity construction for the reason that, coming from a South Korean background myself, it is more difficult to objectively discern this relationship as it is manifest in the ROK (which, perhaps, in itself informs the degrees to which nationalistic interests are prevalent in South Korean archaeology).

Korean academia; only a few were ever interested in doing so (Nelson 2006: 50–51). In North Korea, the majority of foreign scholarly interaction was with the Soviet Union, due to the DPRK's negative disposition towards the West, particularly the United States. Although limited access to North Korean publications hinders our understanding of Soviet-DPRK scholarly exchange, it is known at least that Marxist theory was rather influential in North Korean academia and by extension perhaps, Soviet archaeological methodology as well (Nelson 2006: 48–49). The language and terminology employed by North Korean publications, for example, is decidedly Marxist in character (Nelson 1993: 2, 2006: 37, 43).¹⁹

In South Korea, where the government perceived its “worldwide status to be partly dependent on the longevity of indigenous political systems” (Barnes 2001: 82–83),²⁰ historians and archaeologists unsurprisingly exercised a great deal of influence, setting school curricula at all levels, curating museums, managing cultural heritage resources, and even having a say in selecting national holidays—all with the ultimate aim of forging national solidarity (Pai 1994: 26). In 1961, the first Department of Archaeology and Anthropology was founded at Seoul National University and the decades following marked an increase in salvage excavations associated with the rapid modernization of South Korea (Kim, W. 1983: 3; Nelson 2006: 51). Investment in cultural heritage property retrieval and restoration continued throughout the 1970s and the Korean Archaeological Society [*Hanguk Gogohakhoe* 한국고고학회] was established in 1976. By that time, the amount of data generated far surpassed the speed at which archaeologists could process it (Choi, S. 2008: 163–64). The sum total of archaeological excavations—academic, rescue, and otherwise—in South Korea numbered 107 in 1991; in 2006, the number had jumped to 1,300 (Shoda 2008: 203). South Korean archaeology had achieved great progress in a short amount of time.²¹

¹⁹ Marxist influence on archaeology was not unique to the DPRK. For a discussion on Marxist influence on postwar Japanese archaeology, see Fawcett 1995: 234–36 and Mizoguchi 2010: 87–89; on China, see Tong 1995.

²⁰ See Gries 2005: 9–10 for a discussion on the usage of the past for political aims by Park Chung Hee (1963–1979), one of South Korea's most influential leaders in its formative period.

²¹ For further reading on the most influential scholars and their articles during the first decades of Korean archaeology post-1945, see Kim, C. 2000: 11 ff. See Nelson 1987 for a concise article on the development of early Korean archaeology.

It was inevitable that in time, South Korean archaeological scholarship would come head-to-head with its contemporary Japanese counterpart. Gaya and Silla studies increasingly began to incorporate data from the western Japanese archipelago; even a quick search reveals a large number of studies connecting these early Korean states to early Japan. For a time, Japanese scholars were on the defensive from the attempts of South Korean archaeologists to “correct” some of what they perceived as the wrongs of Japanese colonial scholarship by linking early Japan to early Korea, only in reverse order: Chinese cultural influence was transmitted to Korea and subsequently spread to Japan. The prevailing train of thought in postwar Japan was *Nihonbunkaron* (also *Bunkaron*, *Nihonron*), “discussions of the Japanese,” which boomed in the 1970s and advocated the originality of Japanese ethnicity and nationality, despite the ease with which the notion that Japanese civilization was entirely original to the archipelago could be challenged (Fawcett 1995: 241–42).²² More recently, however, both South Korean and Japanese scholars are contributing to the lively discussion on the early first millennium CE interaction between Korea and Japan (Nelson 2006: 48), although politico-historical tensions still remain. In 1995, for instance, the headquarters of the GGK in Seoul, which, for practical reasons served as the temporary National Museum building in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was ceremonially dismantled to commemorate the fiftieth year of Korean independence from Japan (Pai 2000: 237–43).²³

In North Korea, the past was appropriated for overtly propagandistic purposes (Lankov 2007: 43). The geographic focus of much archaeological research, which had to generate ideological backing for the DPRK government, was Pyongyang. The government sought to firmly establish Pyongyang as the oldest center of Korean civilization (Im 1992: 237): “North Korean official

²² Cummings suggests that one reason archaeologists are still forbidden from studying the ancient tombs of Japan by the Imperial House is that the tombs could potentially reveal a connection to Korean tombs, which are well-studied; such evidence would undermine the independent origins theory of the Japanese imperial line (2005: 33). The ban on studying Japanese royal tombs dates back to 1874 and the Meiji government, and was one reason Japanese archaeologists began seeking work elsewhere and found the perfect candidate in Korea (Pai 2000: 94, 103). In fact, Japanese colonial archaeology conducted in Korea laid the basis for much archaeological research in postwar Japan (Arimitsu 1966: 75). For further reading, see Tsude 1995.

²³ South Korea’s president at the time, Kim Young-sam, also had a vested political interest in the ceremony. The destruction of the GGK building symbolized a new start and a new era, in which the painful memories of the Japanese occupation as well as the rough decades of military dictatorship preceding his presidency, could be laid to rest (Pai 2000: 239).

historians have spent an impressive amount of ink... to prove that Pyongyang has always been the center of Korean polity” (Lankov 2007: 77). By elevating the status of Pyongyang, the DPRK not only gained prestige but could suggest that it was more legitimate than the ROK as the state of the Korean people.²⁴ Although a lack of accessible information makes it difficult to present a survey of North Korean archaeological projects, it appears that as of 1992, a total of at least 100 archaeological sites were excavated and published. The publication history is uneven: the 1960s and 1980s were the most productive years, but there seems to have been a decline in the interim decade (Im 1992: 237).²⁵

A useful lens from which to examine the development of archaeology in the DPRK is the simultaneous advance of *juche* 주체, or self-reliance, philosophy since the mid-1950s (Choi, M. 2008: 68). Because *juche* advocated North Korea’s economic and political independence from foreign countries, it was important that North Korea’s historical independence be demonstrated to the world for the added ideological backing this could generate. In 1958, Kim Il-sung said in a speech, “With the help of historical remains and relics, we must clearly show the people, the new emerging generation in particular, the brilliant cultural tradition left by our ancestor and their patriotic spirit in courageously fighting back the foreign invaders” (Portal 2005: 105). Ample examples of such politically charged rhetoric is present in the chapter headings of the 1977 DPRK publication, *The Outline of Korean History*,²⁶ two examples of which are, “Culture of Korea in Ancient Times Sheds Its Brilliance on the East” and “Koguryo People’s Valorous Struggle Against Aggression” (Foreign Languages Publishing House 1977).

An illustrative example of *juche*-oriented archaeology is the interpretation of Lelang Commandery sites by North Korean scholars,²⁷ who argue that Lelang was located further north beyond the present-day borders of the DPRK or deny its existence altogether. The case of Lelang

²⁴ In fact, Seoul remained the official capital of North Korea until 1972 (Lankov 2007: 80).

²⁵ For a bibliography of North Korean archaeology compiled by South Korean scholars, see Yi, Lee, and Shin 1989.

²⁶ The only North Korean publications I have been able to access are two Foreign Languages Publishing House volumes (see bibliography). Some caution must be exercised when analyzing texts published by the Foreign Languages Publishing House, as these are intended for foreign audiences (but also, perhaps, domestic audiences as well).

²⁷ For a detailed study of Lelang, see Pai 2000.

also demonstrates the far-reaching influence of Japanese colonial scholarship on subsequent Korean archaeology. Lelang sites were excavated by Japanese scholars from 1913. From the Korean point-of-view, Japan's Lelang research must have seemed to be yet another manifestation of Japan's perpetual debasement of Korean culture as inferior to Chinese and Japanese culture. Therefore, in advancing the contradictory interpretation that Lelang sites and artifacts—clearly Chinese—in Korea were merely imports rather than the possessions of the Chinese ruling elite of Lelang, North Korean scholars assert Korean individuality and independence not only from China but simultaneously from Japan as well. One scholar, Hong Ki-mun, even claimed that the Lelang artifacts uncovered by Japanese scholars were fabrications sold to the Japanese; this claim has since been refuted (Pai 1994: 35). A parallel to such nationalistically and politically oriented archaeology is evident in Vietnam, whose historical resistance to Chinese cultural influence is asserted by the interpretation of Chinese material culture found in Vietnam as imports, thereby suggesting a commercial relationship rather than outright Sinicization (Glover 2006: 26). To acknowledge openly that China played a role in shaping Vietnamese culture would be to admit, by implication, that China had fostered a more advanced culture (Glover 2006: 26; Trigger 1984: 359–60). The past, according to Glover, “is a moral force in Vietnam, unequalled anywhere in the world except perhaps in Korea” (Glover 2006: 26).²⁸

One might ask why South Korean archaeologists accept Lelang's localization to the area of Pyongyang when their northern counterparts do not; in fact, the rejection of Lelang's localization by North Korean scholars has been criticized by South Korean scholars as nonsense with no basis in logic (Im 1992: 240; Nelson 1995: 221). The reason perhaps is that the latter have preferred to temper their nationalistic interpretations of the past by grounding them in more scientific foundations in order to appeal to global academia, while in the North such scientific basis and an attempt at more subjective interpretations have been sacrificed to make possible readings of

²⁸ The concerns of territorially smaller nations under the sphere of influence of larger neighbors with asserting cultural individuality is also seen in the example of Portugal, which since the nineteenth century exhibited the same behavior against Spain (Oliveira and Jorge 1995: 255).

history that align perfectly with the government's *juche* ideology.²⁹ This divergence is evident to some extent in the methodologies of North and South Korean archaeology: South Korean scholars place finds within chronological contexts derived from scientific techniques, while North Korean scholars tend to use the more imprecise method of object typology and stratigraphy to deliver general dates that more ably support their hypotheses (Im 1992: 239). A more straightforward difference is that North Korea emphasizes Goguryeo and Goryeo history (these historical states were centered in the North), while the ROK emphasizes United Silla (Lankov 2007: 44; Portal 2005: 105–6, 113–15). The two Koreas' narratives of prehistory diverge as well: DPRK scholars claim that the oldest Paleolithic cave sites in the north are half a million years old, but ROK scholars reject the claim (Foreign Languages Publishing House 1977: 4; Im 1992: 239; Nelson 2006: 43).

Ultimately, however, these divergent interpretations do not represent a significant conflict between North and South Korean archaeological scholarship. Portal notes that Kim Il-sung's focus on "the brilliant cultural tradition of Korea, a pure and homogeneous race unsullied by foreign influence, is quite similar to South Korean archaeologists' preoccupation with Korean ethnicity" (2005: 105). Indeed, the aims of archaeology in the two countries are fundamentally rooted in the response to Japanese colonial archaeology and a desire to promote the distinctiveness of Korea from China and Japan (Nelson 2006: 37). What is more revealing is the lack of exchange between North and South Korean scholars. North Korean publications, few in number to begin with, cannot be accessed without permission in the ROK (Nelson 1993: 8). Nelson notes that she herself only had restricted access to North Korean material during her research trip to South Korea in 1983 (2006: 48–49). One might imagine the same is true in the North, whereby possession of South Korean publications could have harsh consequences if discovered. In recent years, however, scholars from Eastern Europe are visiting the North in greater numbers (Nelson 2006: 50), and the DPRK successfully applied to have a number of Goguryeo tombs named UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Portal 2005: 123). North Korean archaeology appears to be emerging, gradually, from isolation.

²⁹ North Korean archaeologists claim that a "Daedong River culture" (Pyongyang is located on this river), rivals the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt (Lankov 2007: 81; cf. Kang H. S. 2008: 24). Such claims have obviously been ignored by the West. For a North Korean publication on the subject see Foreign Languages Publishing House 2001.

The Dangun myth—the origin myth of the Korean people—is a central constituent of the Korean identity. The perception of the myth by Koreans and its appropriation for political use illustrates the relationship between nationalism and archaeology in Korea, and also highlights the importance of the question of ethnogenesis in Korea. According to the myth, Hwanung descended from Heaven to the earth at Baekdu Mountain, where a bear and a tiger appealed to him to make them human. Only the bear passed Hwanung’s trial and upon her becoming a woman, Hwanung took her as his wife. The she-bear bore a son named Dangun, who founded Korea’s first state, Gojoseon, and ruled for a thousand years.³¹ The year 2333 BCE is considered the date on which Dangun founded Gojoseon and the day, October 3, is a national holiday today (Gaecheonjeol 개천절). Thus, the often heard phrase “five-thousand years of history” is ultimately derived from the Dangun legend.³²

This notion of a five-thousand year history dates back at least to the thirteenth century CE, where it appears in the *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms* [*Samguk Yusa* 삼국유사 三國遺事] (Pai 1994: 26–27).³³ Although Dangun had always been a central figure for folk religions, the Yi Dynasty of the Joseon Kingdom (1392–1897 CE) was the first to use Dangun to legitimate their rule. In the process, it is believed that they simplified or “standardized” the myth from the numerous variations that had existed prior to the one related above. That the first Korean state founded by Dangun was named Gojoseon, which means Old Joseon, is no coincidence. In 1492, a temple for Dangun was built in Pyongyang (subsequently destroyed during the Korean War) (Cummings 2005: 24), so it appears that the myth was at the forefront of social consciousness even a century after it was first

³⁰ For a comprehensive and detailed treatment of the Dangun myth, its historiography, role in nationalism, and other topics, see No, ed. 2000 (cf. Pai 2000, chapter three).

³¹ For a more elaborate telling of the myth, see Nelson 1995.

³² Dangun is not generally perceived as a real historical figure in South Korea, but this does not diminish his symbolic significance. The study of Dangun has spawned a sub-discipline of its own (Dangun studies), which has revealed the many problems one encounters when attempted to analyze the myth against ethnic history. For details, see Nelson 1995.

³³ On a side note, I recently observed that a line of salt in South Korea uses the slogan “Five-thousand years of mystery” [반만년의 신비]. The notion is still prevalent and a core aspect of Korean identity.

appropriated by the Yi Dynasty to legitimize its power. However, Dangun faded from social memory in the following century, only to return in the seventeenth century when Korea faced foreign invasion from the Japanese and the Manchus; some believe that the earlier Mongol invasion of Korea in the thirteenth century marked the beginning of Koreans looking to Dangun as their ethnic ancestor (Suh 2000: 81–182). In the twentieth century, Japanese scholars sought to manipulate the Dangun myth in their pursuit to reinforce the *nissen dōsoron* theory. The idea that the Dangun legend had been introduced by the Mongols in the thirteenth century, and therefore was not originally Korean, was advanced. However, Korean scholars used the evidence of a number of stone slabs found in the Wu family shrine in China (dating to the second century CE), to prove that the Dangun legend predated the arrival of the Mongols in Korea (Lee 1993: 5). There is no definitive proof that that these paintings depict the Dangun myth, and the implications of them having been found in China have not been addressed (Pai 2000: 73).³⁴ Dangun even became a religion in the face of Japanese intellectual assaults: anti-Japanese Korean intellectuals founded *Dangungyo* 단군교, or the religion of Dangun, in the early twentieth century (Pai 1994: 27, 2010: 266–67).

After independence, the Dangun myth was used to strengthen the ideological legitimacy of the Kim Il-sung regime of North Korea, much as it had done for the Yi Dynasty. As the story goes, Kim Jong-il, Kim Il-sung's son, was born on the slopes of Baekdu Mountain, where Dangun was born (Nelson 2006: 50).³⁵ In the 1980s, a log cabin was built on the mountain to mark and commemorate Kim Jong-il's birthplace. This artificial connection was highly effective in creating an ideological basis for the regime; allegedly the cabin is one of North Korea's most popular tourist destinations (Pai 1994: 27, 2010: 59).³⁶ To further link his own lineage to the dawn of Korean history, Kim Il-sung approved the excavation of the supposed tomb of Dangun in 1993. The *People's Daily*, a North

³⁴ For images and a study of the paintings, see Kim, C. 1948.

³⁵ Kim Jong-il was in fact born in Russia where Kim Il-sung operated a guerilla outfit against the Japanese during the colonial period.

³⁶ Another somewhat dubious claim, as domestic tourism is probably virtually non-existent in North Korea due to severely restricted movement within the country.

Korean periodical, reported the positive results on October 16, 1993.³⁷ The interpretation of the find was nationalistically charged: “Koreans were the oldest (and therefore finest) people in the world, with one continuous line of history from the thirtieth century B.C. down to the present” (Cummings 2005: 24). Of course, even if the skeletal remains discovered are authentic and the dating accurate, it is impossible to attribute them to Dangun. In 1994, one month before his death, Kim Il-sung approved the reconstruction of Dangun’s tomb (Portal 2005: 106). The reconstruction is highly anachronistic, utilizing elements of architecture drawn from all periods of Korean history (Portal 2005: 106–8). It certainly is not what Dangun’s tomb would have looked like, if ever such a tomb existed. Of course, historical accuracy was never a priority; the tomb was meant to monumentalize the whole of Korean history and strengthen the political authority of the DPRK regime. According to the *Korea Herald*, a 126-member delegation from South Korea was permitted to visit Dangun’s tomb on the occasion of the national holiday Gaecheonjeol in 2002.³⁸ It is clear that Dangun has been the weapon for many political maneuvers by the DPRK to claim a kind of ideological superiority over the ROK.³⁹

Dangun’s tomb is not the only example of the use of ancient tombs by the DPRK to cement national identity and build political legitimacy. Lankov describes the “discovery” of King Dongmyeong’s (58–19 BCE) tomb: “In the early 1970s, Kim Jong-il pointed to a major shortcoming of North Korean archaeology: archaeologists had failed to locate the tomb of King Tongmyong, one of Koguryo’s most remarkable leaders... Encouraged by the wise instructions of the Dear Leader, archaeologists immediately produced the required tomb which was duly ‘restored’ and became a tourist attraction...” (2007: 45).⁴⁰ The reconstruction, like Dangun’s tomb, features an amalgam of anachronistic elements, although it was initially an authentic Goguryeo tomb (though not necessarily Dongmyeong’s) (Lankov 2007: 80; Portal 2005: 112–13). In December 2012, the DPRK

³⁷ According to the report, which was headlined “5000 year-long history and homogeneity of the nation corroborated,” eighty-six bone fragments belonging to Dangun and his wife were found and dated to 5001 BP by electron paramagnetic resonance dating (Glover 2006: 22; Pai 2000: 60).

³⁸ “S. Koreans head North for festivity,” *Korea Herald*, October 2, 2002, LexisNexis Academic.

³⁹ For details on the South Korean response to North Korean appropriation of Dangun, see Pai 2000: 269–70.

⁴⁰ King Dongmyeong is an especially significant figure for Korean history; he is famous for extending the borders of Goguryeo far to the north into what is today China.

invited much ridicule from the Western press by claiming to have discovered a “unicorn lair,” which in fact was merely poorly translated by the (North) Korean Central News Agency.⁴¹ The alleged find was of the lair of the mythical Girin beast [기린, Chinese *qílín* 麒麟], associated with King Dongmyeong as his mount of choice.

Yet another controversial find was the 1949 discovery of Anak Tomb No. 3, not far from Pyongyang, dated by inscriptions precisely to 347 CE. According to the tomb inscriptions, the occupant of the tomb was Dong Shou 冬壽, a general of the state of Former Yan 前燕 (337–370 CE), who fled to Korea (Im 1992: 240). Since 1959, the tenth anniversary of the tomb’s discovery and coinciding with the assertion of *juche* philosophy by the Kim Il-sung regime, the tomb was attributed to Goguryeo kings in an attempt to eliminate the site’s foreign connections. Non-DPRK scholars have noted that the tomb’s architecture is demonstrably Chinese, and comparable tombs exist in China (Portal 2005: 113; Erickson, Yi, and Nylan 2010: 141–44). The tomb of another important historical figure, Gija 箕子, who appears in Chinese texts as an eleventh-century BCE figure who migrated to Korea and ruled Gojoseon after Dangun, is understandably “dismissed by North Korean scholars as an invention during the colonial period” for its implications of Chinese influence on the development of Korea (Portal 2005: 109).⁴² This tomb is not a modern reconstruction but possibly one established in 1102 CE in Pyongyang and subsequently relocated a number of times (Shim 2002: 276). Finally, the tomb of King Taejo of Goryeo (918–948 CE), who unified the Korean Peninsula during his reign, has been reconstructed and the site is marked by inscriptions of Kim Il-sung himself in archaizing style (Portal 2005: 116–17). The manipulations of tombs has clearly been central to the DPRK’s nationalistic archaeology program, particularly

⁴¹ “Lair of King Tongmyong’s Unicorn Reconfirmed in DPRK [고구려시조왕의 기린굴 재 확인],” *Korea Central News Agency*, November 29, 2012, [[URL](#)].

⁴² Shim argues in his 2002 article that Gija’s supposed migration to the east is “an anachronistic fabrication,” an idea advanced by postcolonial Korean scholars for whom Gija represented the long sought-after link between prehistory and history. Under the Goryeo Kingdom, Gija was elevated to the status of a cultic figure for a number of possible reasons, including the desire of Goryeo intellectuals to associate more closely to China as a result of Mongol invasion and rule, and, following the establishment of Joseon, the popularity of Confucianism, to which Gija, being an ancient Chinese figure, was eminently linked (Shim 2002). See also Nelson 1995: 225–26 for further reading on Gija and the Chinese connection to Korean protohistory.

effective because North (and South) Korea are countries in which ancestors and ancestry forms a critical part of ethnonational identity.

CONCLUSIONS: CHINA'S NORTHEAST PROJECT AND THE FUTURE OF KOREAN ARCHAEOLOGY

Nowhere else in the world is history so relevant to present issues as in Northeast Asia. The presentation of the region's history in Japanese textbooks has repeatedly soured relations between Japan and South Korea/China. Frequent territorial disputes cannot be easily explained solely in terms of modern economics and the procurement of valuable natural resources because history plays such an important role in the debate. Not only is historical data used to make arguments for and against the sovereignty of nations over particular pieces of territory, the element of national pride at stake is as important if not more so than the potential material gains that could accompany the seizure of land. The ongoing Dokdo/Takeshima conflict between Japan and South Korea, as well as the most recent Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute between China and Japan, are prime examples of the collision of nationalism, politics, and history in the same arena.

In North and South Korea, even more controversial than the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute was the five-year state-funded project launched in China in 2002, called the Serial Research Project on the History and Current State of the Northeast Borderland [东北边疆历史与现状系列研究工程 동북병강사여현장계열연구공정], abbreviated the Northeast Project [东北工程 동북공정]. This project, which by some accounts had a budget of twenty billion yuan (three billion US dollars), was China's attempt to claim Goguryeo history as its own and was not merely an academic issue but one with enormous political ramifications (Yoon 2004: 118). I am only able to briefly discuss the most salient of these due to the complexity of the topic.

China's motivation for the Northeast Project was to promote the united multiethnic state theory laid out in its constitution in 1954.⁴³ It was critical that China's border provinces, largely

⁴³ Tōngyī de duōmínzúguójīa 统一的多民族国家论. Chinese archaeology is largely decentralized (provinces have their own archaeological institutes, publications, and have a great degree of autonomy), but regional

inhabited by ethnic minorities, associate more closely with the collective Chinese identity than that of neighboring countries or a distinct ethnic identity;⁴⁴ the potential instability that could be caused in such an event has already been demonstrated in Tibet and Uighur Xinjiang (Yoon 2004: 99–100).⁴⁵ Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture, adjacent to North Korea, is one area prone to this same risk due to its population of approximately forty percent ethnic Koreans, the issue of North Korean refugees, and, unlike Tibet, the fact that Korea is a globally recognized sovereign nation. In launching the Northeast Project, China was attempting to limit Korean influence on the ethnic Korean community of northeast China (Yoon 2004: 100, 111). One way to achieve this aim was to claim that the history of the region (in which Goguryeo history is prominent) was not Korean but in fact belonged to the Chinese sphere.

The angry response from South Korea severely tested diplomatic ties between China and South Korea, especially given that Chinese historians had consistently written the history of the Goguryeo kingdom into the history of Korea's Three Kingdoms up to the 1980s (Yoon 2004: 107, 2005: 88). The same history was now being integrated by China into Chinese history: In 2004, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs removed Goguryeo from a summary of Korean history on its website. To make matters worse, the ministry's response to subsequent South Korean outrage was to remove pre-World War II Korean history from the website altogether, circumventing the problem but simultaneously (from the Korean point-of-view) deleting Korean identity (Gries 2005:

archaeological projects do not strive to assert the historical independence or cultural individuality of the provinces. Rather, the purpose of regional archaeological projects is to claim a particular province's historical importance and contributions to Chinese civilization (Von Falkenhausen 1995).

⁴⁴ A somewhat comparable example is Spain, where Spanish nationalism has been challenged by Basque, Catalanian, and Galician nationalisms. Spain has been conceived of as a single entity at least since the fifteenth century CE and in the mid-nineteenth century, efforts to build a single national history of Spain began. Interestingly, Spanish archaeology at present is largely depoliticized (Díaz-Andreu 1995).

⁴⁵ In light of these examples, China is aware that mishandling the issue of ethnic minorities could have significant consequences. Parts of Chinese history could easily be claimed by neighboring nations, for instance the history of the Yuan Dynasty by Mongolia and Nanyue/Baiyue history by Vietnam, and if this occurs, the whole of China's extensive borders could experience instability. To prevent this, China has launched the Northwest Project 西北工程 and the Southwest Project 西南工程, less debated because the histories targeted by those projects are that of ethnic groups officially a part of China (Chinese state censorship is therefore able to regulate all discussion). Additionally, part of the underlying issue is economic; China's rapid economic growth was not equally spread out so that the core provinces benefitted while border provinces fell behind (Yoon 2004: 111–12, 2005: 29–33).

3–4). Although sources for the DPRK’s response are unavailable or inaccessible,⁴⁶ Pyongyang was sure to have been irritated particularly by Beijing’s application in 2003 to UNESCO to make Goguryeo tombs located in present-day Chinese territory a *Chinese* World Heritage Site. Pyongyang had made the same application for Goguryeo tombs in North Korean territory two years prior.⁴⁷ China’s Northeast Project was such a critical issue, a threat to the existence of the Korean identity,⁴⁸ that it prompted the first ever joint DPRK-ROK research project on Goguryeo tombs in 2005 (Gries 2005: 3–4, 8).⁴⁹

Territorial disputes are also implicit in the Northeast Project controversy (Nelson 1995: 223).⁵⁰ Korea considers the Gando Convention, signed by Japan and China in 1909 to acknowledge Chinese claim on the Gando territory at the border between China and Korea, null and void (Yoon 2004). More symbolically significant is the rapid development of the northern half of Baekdu Mountain, under Chinese control, by China. Although, as we have seen, Baekdu Mountain is linked closely to and perceived together with the origins of Korea and, indeed, has historically been controlled by Korean states, an agreement between China and the DPRK in 1962 split the mountain roughly in half between the two states. China’s aggressive development of the region as well as its application to make the location a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, have tested Sino-Korean

⁴⁶ Due to state censorship, the Northeast Project controversy was not covered extensively by Chinese media (Gries 2005: 12).

⁴⁷ In the end, UNESCO chose not to address the issue directly and granted both China and North Korea’s request in 2004 (Gries 2005: 3).

⁴⁸ The issue is especially sensitive for North Korea. Goguryeo’s territory at its height extended both north and south of the Yalu River. China therefore considers Goguryeo to have had Chinese roots (Choi, S. 2008: 170; Nelson 2006: 50). North Korea sees such expansion as exemplary of Korea’s historical strength and political independence (see the discussion on King Dongmyeong’s tomb, above). Goguryeo history is therefore central to the DPRK government, which, while it claims descent from Gojoseon and has produced some “evidence,” has concrete archaeological evidence from the Goguryeo period. The government’s legitimacy is built from such evidence and to cede that Goguryeo was in any way Chinese would utterly undermine it. For details on the interpretation of Goguryeo history by Chinese and Korean historians, see Kang, H. S. 2008: 23 ff.

⁴⁹ Further joint projects have been conducted since in North Korean archaeological sites, although these were limited in scope (see Kang, H. S. 2008: 20, 37).

⁵⁰ See Seretis 2005: 216 for a concise definition of the symbolic significance of territory to a national group and its role in the national-identity building process.

relations especially given Baekdu Mountain's status in Korean consciousness as the birthplace of Korean civilization and an eminently Korean landscape.⁵¹

What lies in the future for Korean archaeology? Its importance to the state and the public is unlikely to diminish. If anything, the influence of archaeology will only grow. Kohl and Fawcett note that "it is obvious that archaeology will continue to play a critical and inevitable role in the forging of national consciousness" (Kohl and Fawcett 1995: 13). Northeast Asia is still very much in flux, with China's ever-increasing global dominance, North Korea's political instability, and the possible prospect of Korean reunification. National identities will continue to change and archaeology will be called on to facilitate the process. In the midst of all the changes, Northeast Asia remains nonetheless deeply rooted in the past and the archaeology of Northeast Asian countries is still in many regards a rather "traditional" field despite significant advances in theory and methodology.

Korean archaeology suffers from what Pai calls "invasion neurosis": "Xenophobia, patriotic sentiments, and competing political agendas pose the greatest barrier to an objective and analytical study of Korean archaeology and ancient history today (1994: 45). On one hand, Nelson argues, a measure of responsibility should be placed on Western academia, which has, generally speaking, viewed Korea as somehow less significant than China and Japan (1993: 4). Yet, Koreans scholars themselves are responsible for defining the future of Korean archaeology. Choi Seong-rak stresses that Korean archaeology is its own field with its own needs, and so should carefully deliberate what it does and does not take from Western archaeology (2008). However, as long as Korean archaeology remains nationalistically-charged, it will be difficult for global academia to understand and participate in discourse.

The most recent works produced in the West regarding the issue of archaeology's changing role in a world of nation-states suggest adaptive approaches. For instance, Holtorf presents a case for archaeology guided by public interests and needs: "If the past is now, not then, archaeologists need to change their focus: from telling stories about past realities told in the present to telling stories about present-day realities using the past merely as a reference point... Giving people the

⁵¹ Miller, J. Berkshire, "China's Other Territorial Dispute: Baekdu Mountain," December 23, 2012, *The Diplomat*, [[URL](#)].

past they want is to give archaeologists and heritage professionals the past they ought to study” (2013: 80). While I am not wholly in agreement with Holtorf’s position, his fundamental suggestions are thought-provoking: What is the function of the past if not to serve the present? But the example of Northeast Asia has shown that too much influence by modern issues on archaeology can be restrictive. Choi Mong-Lyong posits that the attempt to understand the cultures and history of Northeast Asia merely along the confines of politics is unproductive (2008: 67). Nelson echoes these views and adds that in Korea, despite ethnicity being particularly difficult to observe in the archaeological record, much effort focuses in ethnic studies nonetheless (1995: 231).

One might ask whether China’s Northeast Project was an ultimately fruitful endeavor. Five years after its conclusion, it is still too early to evaluate the project’s impact. In the political realm, the Northeast Project stirred up major controversy and stressed diplomatic relations between China and Korea. What has it accomplished in the academic realm? While the dialogue spurred by the controversy brought history to the forefront of national consciousness and additional funding for relevant research stimulated lively debates in academia, even prompting the DPRK and the ROK to collaborate on joint research, in the end, because all research was funded by the government (coupled with, in China’s case, state censorship), Chinese scholars were unable to advance original positions if those contradicted the government’s stance. Similarly, in South and North Korea, the government controls all archaeological funding (Pai 2000: 13), so that it is worth questioning whether the Northeast Project actually contributed in producing new knowledge. It is a great shame, Nelson notes, using the following example: Energies directed toward the question of ethnogenesis has placed Korea in a position in which it can truly contribute to the field of ethnic studies worldwide, if only it can disregard the nationalistically inspired and mandated notions of time immemorial Korean ethnicity (1995: 230–31).

Paradoxically, the nationalistic needs of modern nations to discover in the past the necessary backing to construct modern identities that has fueled archaeological research for decades and engendered the great potential of Northeast Asian archaeology, is simultaneously hindering the realization of this very same potential. At present, Northeast Asia is a battleground in which the “past is subjugated and harnessed in order to create the social order of the present”

(Yoffee 2007: 1); “accounts of the past are sent into battle, much as people are” (Alcock 2002: 17). The real casualty of this battle may well be a future of friendly political relations, cooperative scholarly research, and the generation of new knowledge for the benefit of global academia, as each nation in the region tries to claim mutually exclusive ownership of what is, in truth, a shared past.

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